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ABSTRACT

The new breed of plagiarists knows that stealing from the World Wide Web is quicker than stealing from the library at universities that typically provide online services. The new plagiarists have been weaned on chat rooms, guest books, news groups, mailing lists, MOOs, and MUDs--myriad online ways to procrastinate when final papers are due. The lazier the student, however, the more predictable his/her methods. The more electronic, the easier to access original documents. The more brazen, the greater the chances of self-incrimination. When accused of plagiarism, the new breed tends not to cower or cry but to rail and deny, defending thefts made with the click of a mouse. To bust the new breed of plagiarist: (1) Know your search engines; (2) Use a phrase from the first paragraph; (3) Choose odd or awkward phrases in body-text searches; (4) Do not use "Boolean" searches in Web engines, but do use them in library databanks; and (5) Use Boolean searches when accessing specific archives. Plagiarism represents a challenge to an educator's integrity and expertise and puts his/her reputation on the line. Go online to preserve it. (NKA)

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Michael Bugeja

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Busting the New Breed of Plagiarist

by Michael Bugeja

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A few years ago you couldn't bust plagiarists electronically because they were too lazy to learn how to use the Internet. Plagiarists are still lazy, of course; but the new breed came of age in the computer era. They know that stealing from the Web is quicker than stealing from the library at universities which, like my own, typically provide online services.

Of course, the Internet is not quick if you are seeking scholarly citations or reputable sources. After all, the Web is the world's largest vanity press and as such requires discretion and research skills. Chances are your plagiarist has neither and chose the quick and easy rather than the discreet and respectable, accessing a file or a site that will come up on typical search engines like cherries on slot machines.

Furthermore, the new plagiarists seem more brazen than word thieves of yore. Why not? They have been weaned on chat rooms, guest books, news groups, mailing lists, MOOs, MUDs—myriad online ways to procrastinate when final papers are due. The brazenness may also stem from the false sense of security that computers provide, as if no one else is watching through Windows when, of course, the reverse is true.

All of this works in your favor. The lazier the student, the more predictable his or her methods. The more electronic, the easier to access original documents. The more brazen, the greater the chances of self-incrimination.

When accused of plagiarism, the new breed tends not to cower or cry but to rail and deny, defending thefts made with a click of a mouse. Of course the material is mine, they contend. After all, they renamed pilfered files before saving them in a folder called "My Documents."

Here's how to bust a plagiarist who believes you won't byte.

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1. Know Your Search Engines

You can learn loads about search engines at Search Engine Watch <http://www.searchenginewatch.com> or Search Engine Showdown <http://www.notess.com/search>. There are dozens of search engines, among them: Excite, AltaVista, HotBot, Infoseek, Yahoo!, Lycos, Snap, Northern Light, etc. These are good for in-depth searching. If your favorite search engine fails you, try another one; cyberspace grows larger every day, and even the most comprehensive engines are falling behind, so there's less overlap than you might imagine. For speedier results, try a meta-search engine like <http://www.metacrawler.com>, which accesses multiple search engines and allows you three search criteria: "any words" (of little use in plagiarism cases), "all words," and "phrase." Go with "phrase" (see below), and you're apt to snare a plagiarist in a matter of seconds with several citations.

2. Use a Phrase from the First Paragraph

Lazy plagiarists steal right from the top of documents, so enter a long phrase from the first paragraph of a suspect paper into your favorite search or meta-search engine. Beginning sentences are important because many search engines summarize or use them in abbreviated listings. If the new breed were less lazy, and more talented, they would steal from sites requiring passwords and logins, generally missed by the "spiders" of search engines that crawl the Web for sites the way arachnids do for bug fodder. Not to worry. Your plagiarist just wants to steal and be done with it, convinced you're over 30 and thus, computer-disadvantaged.

3. Choose Odd or Awkward Phrases in Body-Text Searches

For a variety of reasons, few of them associated with stealth, some plagiarists steal from the body of a document—usually from findings or conclusion sections, which require the most math and/or thinking. That makes searching for clues a bit more tedious, because you have to analyze a suspicious paper for odd or awkward phrases unlikely to be found by the kilobyte-full in typical Web searches. For instance, "nothing about net" yields about 5,200 hits on HotBot; "nothing about net worth" turns up four listings, including two about Michael Jordan. While this looks nifty, it isn't. Phrases like "nothing but net" (or even "nothing but net worth") contain words that a few engines, including HotBot, occasionally may gloss over because "about" and "but" occur too often in search strings.

For the best results, identify and enter phrases that aroused your suspicion in the first place—ones your student can't pronounce, let alone spell. In busting a recent plagiarism case about advertising and ethics, I entered into a meta-search engine the uncommon phrase "indispensable guarantors" and the clumsy locution "Considering advertising's social impact."

Bingo. Nothing but plagiarism—five Web sites containing the source document.

4. Don't Use Boolean Searches in Web Engines; Do Use Them in Library Databanks

The word "Boolean" means "logical word combinations," and is used in tandem with connectors like AND, OR, NOT. You don't want to go Boolean in a search engine unless your word choices are illogical, such as "beanbag AND ethics," yielding 282 hits on Northern Light. Conversely, the same search engine produced 164,801 hits for "advertising AND ethics."

Nonetheless, Boolean searches are more efficient if you are searching library databanks. Although they require an extra step, and sometimes a stop at the library, such searches are worthwhile when search-engine options fail to yield results.

Library databanks often contain information that search engines miss. That's the good news. The bad news is you usually won't be able procure the source document in a plagiarism case, simply an abstract thereof. However, the abstract should provide you with enough information to determine whether you should access an article online from a magazine (see below).

For instance, the database "Periodical Abstracts" at Ohio University's library lists 405 citations for "advertising AND ethics," including this one:

- Author: Anonymous
- Title: Vatican stresses need for moral advertising
- Appears In: Advertising Age. v68n10 Mar 10, 1997. p.26
- Article Length: Long (31+ col inches)
- Abstract: Excerpts from the Pontifical Council for Social Communications' "Ethics in Advertising" text assert that advertising is a mirror that helps shape the reality of society it reflects and urges voluntary ethical codes for advertising.
- Subjects: Advertising. Self regulation. Ethics.

That abstract contains enough data to indicate that this may have been the original document in the plagiarism case mentioned earlier.

Finally, it helps to know how Boolean searches score hits in library databases. Typically they log operative words in the "Subject" category (see above: advertising/self regulation/ethics). English students, in particular, are nailed via this method because unlike journalism majors, usually they are required to have a topic and theme in their papers, such as Hamlet (topic) betrayal (theme). Many popular courses have Boolean-like titles such as "Women in Media" or "Science and Religion." If you teach such a class, this method is for you.

5. Use Boolean Searches When Accessing Specific Archives

Boolean searches work well when accessing the archives of a specific magazine that has online search options. Some Internet publications like The Chronicle of Higher Education require subscriptions before you can access archives; others, like Editor & Publisher, allow you to use archives for free, but then charge you a fee per downloaded article. Some periodical archives, like the one at Advertising Age, are free of charge.

Choose a magazine archive associated with your discipline or that you might have used in class or cited in your own work. For instance, in the advertising-ethics case, the plagiarist in question had access to a mere handful of magazines in her media sequence, among them, Advertising Age and Ad Week. The Boolean search above at <http://www.adage.com> produced the original document in the fifth citation.

By the way, did you happen to note that the plagiarist stole from a Vatican document? Brazen... but she didn't have a prayer.

• **Chat Room Confessions.** Sometimes plagiarists steal from or brag about stealing in discussion forums and newsgroups. In such cases, you might want to use a specialized search engine like <http://www.deja.com> to access those files. (Be sure to read the "terms and conditions of use" page at <http://www.deja.com/ info/policy.shtml> to familiarize yourself with rules associated with using the search engine.) Drop in the student's name and see what messages he or she sent and to whom. Drop in your own name, since a brazen plagiarist might boast about your having the nerve to accuse him or her of plagiarism—and then provide the evidence in chat (the Internet version of jailhouse gossip).

• **Paper Mill Marks.** The new breed of plagiarist also buys from Internet paper mills instead of from cynical teaching assistants with gambling habits; trouble is, those paper-chase TAs usually sold locally and were careful to keep track of what essays went to which professors. Electronic paper mills sell worldwide, and could care less; thus, a stock essay can be sold to a variety of students, some of whom are bold enough to post the work on their home pages or share excerpts in chat rooms, mailing lists, news groups, etc. Tap, tap, tap. Nailed.

• **Footnote Fools.** The real lazy plagiarist—the one who has yet to learn the Web—still exists. If you can't bust the fool using Internet techniques, check dates of books and articles cited in footnotes of a suspect paper. If all citations are five or more years old, before Internet use was popular in academe, chances are the plagiarist bought the paper from a cynical TA still paying off gambling debts.

Plagiarism is all about gambling—a student betting that you lack the fortitude to come up with evidence to back your suspicions. In the bygone paper epoch, your suspicions alone would have sufficed at the Office of Judiciaries; voice them now without ample back-up, and you can find yourself the target of a student's complaint ranging from slander to due process. In the end, students have become more brazen because too many professors lack the time or the will to nail a suspected plagiarist. That affects academic standards.

Plagiarism is more than theft. It represents a challenge to your integrity and expertise and puts your reputation on the line.

Go online and preserve it.

AWP

Michael Bugeja, Special Assistant to the President at Ohio University, is the creator of the character-development program Your PATH at Ohio (emphasizing personal accountability, trust, and honor.) He is also a poet and writer whose most recent verse collections are Talk (Arkansas) and Millennium's End (Archer).